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XXXIV

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS AND THE HYMN

by

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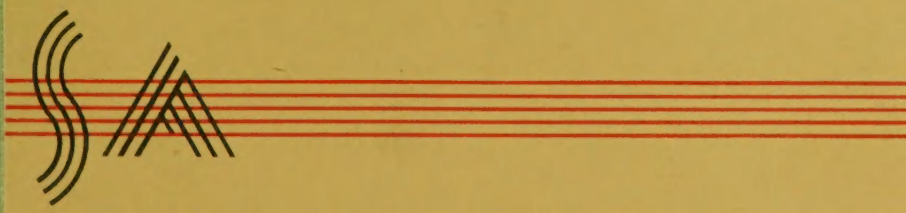

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I

Only two outstanding composers have concerned themselves seriously with hymns, composed new hymn tunes, and used hymns in their compositions — J. S. Bach and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Born in 1872 at Down Ampney in Gloucestershire, Vaughan Williams grew up in an England dominated by strong musical personalities from the continent and by several worthy Britishers. Stanford and Parry were excellent teachers, but their training, like Sullivan's, was largely German. Elgar's early works show his German training, but his later music, from the *Enigma Variations,* show him tilling a new row in British soil. Sullivan, too, became more British as he embarked on the long collaboration with Gilbert and drew strength from British traditions of madrigal and part-song, as well as from works of the naturalized Handel. When Vaughan Williams was in his twenties, the continental influences piled up round him. Trained as an undergraduate at Cambridge and then at the Royal College of Music, he interrupted his studies to go to Berlin to soak himself in authentic Wagnerian performances and to study composition with Herzogenberg and Max Bruch. Returning to England, the young composer completed the requirements for the Doctor of Music degree at Cambridge and proudly bore the title his life long. Somewhat later he went to France to study with Maurice Ravel, whose influence on his work turned out to be great and lasting. In 1901 he was twenty-nine years old, a superbly educated musician with several original works already to his credit.

His involvement with hymns goes back, however, to the two years he spent as organist of St. Barnabas, South Lambeth, from 1895 to 1897. He admitted later that, although he never did play the organ well, this appointment "gave me an insight into good and bad church music which stood me in good stead later on." Another strong influence was the music of Purcell. New life came into the Purcell Society in 1887; it was a compliment to young Vaughan Williams that he was asked to edit the volume of *Welcome Odes.* He heard performances of Purcell's *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day, King Arthur,* and *Dido and Aeneas.* The *Welcome Odes* appeared in two parts in 1905 and 1910. Another strong influence was the music of William Byrd and Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius,* at whose first performance in 1899 he was present. It was also during the early years of this century that Vaughan Williams, together with his friends Gustav Holst and Cecil Sharp, became fascinated with English folk songs. They started to collect in earnest in 1903. When he came to edit *The English Hymnal* in 1904-06, he was able to draw on a rich stock of folk materials for tunes.

For years, hymn-singing in Britain had languished because the most-used hymnal, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861), was so conservative. Many tunes and texts had become corrupt; a great deal of inferior music was included. Vaughan Williams had first-hand experience of these shortcomings during his tenure as organist. In 1901 his friend Percy Dearmer became vicar of St. Mary's Primrose Hill. Martin Shaw was his organist. Michael Kennedy, in, *The Works of Vaughan Williams* (London, O.U.P., 1964), tells the story: "In 1903, with a group of friends, Dearmer began to compile a small number of hymns which could supplement *Hymns Anceint and Modern* . . .Dearmer and his colleagues decided to continue their work and to publish about 150 hymns under the title *English Hymns.*" After naming the full committee of four clergymen and three laymen, Kennedy continues: "On the recommendation of Canon Henry Scott Holland and Cecil Sharp the committee decided in 1904 to approach Vaughan Williams to be the musical editor." Vaughan Williams later wrote: "I thought it over for 24 hours and then decided to accept, but I found that the work occupied me for two years . . . The truth is that I determined to do the work thoroughly and that, besides being a compendium of all the tunes of worth already in use, the book should, in addition, be a thesaurus of all the finest hynm tunes in the world—at all events all such as were compatible with the metres for which I had to find tunes." As work progressed, it became clear that the book would have to be a full one, not just a collection of 150 hymns.

The committee, says Kennedy, checked all texts carefully and tried to restore the author's original words in cases where changes had been made. Dearmer and Athelstan Riley were helpful in providing words for tunes to which no English words could be fitted; in this way came the hymn, "Ye watchers and ye holy ones," by Riley, to the fine tune from the Cologne Song Book of 1623. Dearmer supplied words to the chorale that starts Wagner's *Die Meistersinger.* Regarding the tunes, the editor later wrote:

> I did my best to eliminate the bad ones. This was difficult, because I was not entirely my own master. My committee insisted that certain very popular tunes be retained . . . My committee and I finally settled our quarrel with a compromise by which the worst offenders were confined in an appendix at the end of the book which we nicknamed the 'Chamber of Horrors.'

Turning to the book itself, the preface states:

> It is indeed a moral rather than a musical issue. No doubt it requires a certain effort to tune oneself to the moral atmosphere implied by a fine melody; and it is far easier to dwell in the miasma of the languishing and sentimental hymn tunes which so often disfigure our services. Such poverty of heart may not be uncommon, but at least it should not be encouraged by those who direct the services of the church; it ought no longer to be true anywhere that the most exalted moments of a church-goer's week are

associated with music that would not be tolerated in any place of secular entertainment.

Later in his preface, Vaughan Williams listed the sources of the music: German, French and Swiss, Italian, Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, American, British Isles. Included are a number of plainsong hymns in both square and modern notation. The old psalter tunes (e. g. Dundee, St. Anne) are given in the original notation, each line beginning and ending with a long note, which makes them far easier to sing. Alternative versions are given for many well-loved tunes; fa-burdens with tunes in the tenor, descants for sopranos, and independent SATB settings for the choir while the people sing the main melody. Dr. Williams makes it clear that hymns should normally be sung in unison, the organ supplying the harmony; on that account he pitched them low enough so that the top note is rarely higher than e''.

The book contains nearly forty folk songs adapted to suitable texts, also five carol tunes. There are twenty-five tunes harmonized by Bach, three of his composition. There is a great wealth of Greek, Latin and other foreign texts in English translations, the original first-lines given in an appendix. In at least twenty-five cases, Vaughan Williams and his colleagues were able to find new settings for well-liked hymns whose music he deemed unworthy. Usually, Vaughan Williams's solution was to invent or find an entirely new tune, not to try to make the existing one respectable by reharmonizing it. Among are these are:

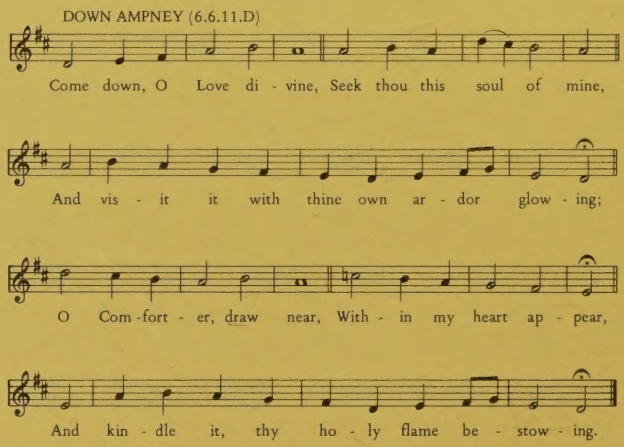
205 Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
273 Savior, again to thy dear Name
274 Sun of my soul
15 O little town of Bethlehem
389 Fight the good fight
399 Hark, hark, my soul
408 Immortal love, forever full
409 In the cross of Christ I glory
439 My faith looks up to thee
445 O for a closer walk with God
476 Rejoice, the Lord is King
477 Rock of Ages
499 There's a wideness in God's mercy
512 When morning gilds the skies
524 God be with you till we meet again
577 O Jesus, I have promised
578 O Jesus, thou art standing
595 I think, when I read that sweet story
302 And now, O Father
316 Just as I am
364 All hail the power
383 Dear Lord and Father

Of these, two are by Vaughan Williams, nos. 273 (Magda) and 524 (Randolph). William Shrubsole's tune for "All hail the power" was so liked by the editor that he later made an anthem setting of it. The point of these settings is obvious: each one is a vast improvement on what it replaces; all are easy and interesting to sing. The success of

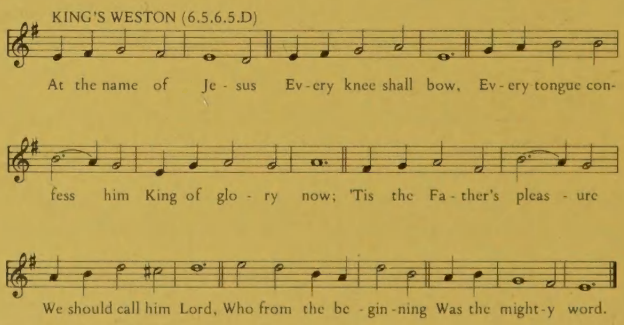
these substitutions shows the wisdom of the adage:

"never take anything away unless you put something better in its place."

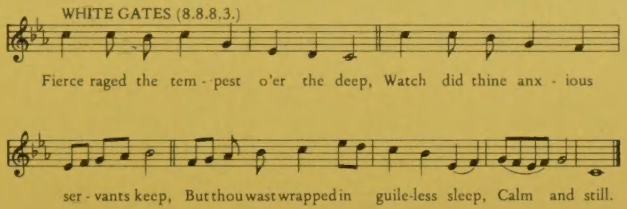
In the first edition he included only four of his own tunes, modestly attributed them to Anon.; later he added three and acknowledged all as his own. Hymn 152, DOWN AMPNEY, is the setting of a translation of R. F. Littledale of a 15th century Latin hymn, "Come down, O Love divine." The unusual meter (6.6.11.D) demanded a special setting. Dr. Williams's setting is syllabic save for a changing-note on weak syllables in lines 3 and 6. So interrelated are all six phrases that we hardly notice that there are no literal repeats.


DOWN AMPNEY (6.6.11.D)
Come down, O Love di - vine, Seek thou this soul of mine,
And vis - it it with thine own ar - dor glow - ing;
O Com - fort - er, draw near, With - in my heart ap - pear,
And kin - dle it, thy ho - ly flame be - stow - ing.

No. 368, KING'S WESTON, sets a poem by Caroline Noel (d. 1877), "At the Name of Jesus," suggested by a Pauline phrase. The eight-line stanza (6.5.6.5.D) is matched by eight phrases of music in e-minor with no conventional cadences and only two on the tonic. The rhythmic germ of two shorts and a long starts every phrase except the seventh.

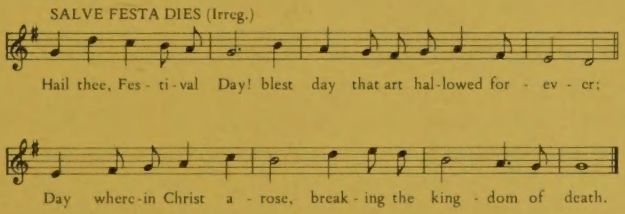

KING'S WESTON (6.5.6.5.D)
At the name of Je - sus Ev - ery knee shall bow, Ev - ery tongue con-
fess him King of glo - ry now; 'Tis the Fa - ther's pleas - ure
We should call him Lord, Who from the be - gin - ning Was the might - y word.

No. 541, WHITE GATES, sets a poem by G. Thring (d. 1903), also suggested by a New Testament episode: "Fierce raged the tempest o'er the deep." The irregular meter (8.8.8.3.) is set in four different phrases of music with many traits in common.

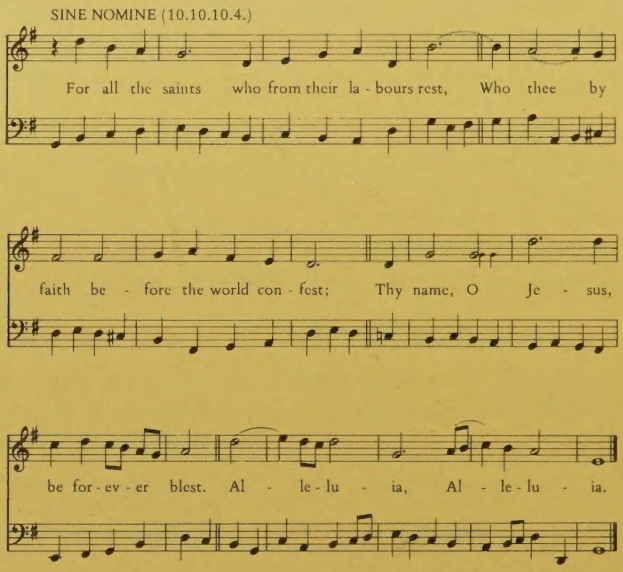

WHITE GATES (8.8.8.3.)
Fierce raged the tem - pest o'er the deep, Watch did thine anx - ious
ser - vants keep, But thou wast wrapped in guile-less sleep, Calm and still.

Vaughan Williams's setting of the 6th century Latin poem, SALVE, FESTA DIES, an Easter processional of eleven verses, no. 624, shows the editor's instinct for variety within a design involving repetition. The hymn starts with the refrain, which is sung after each verse. Verses 2,4,6,8,10 have their own music, which lies fairly high; verses 3,5,7,9,11 have different music, with different rhythm and lower range.

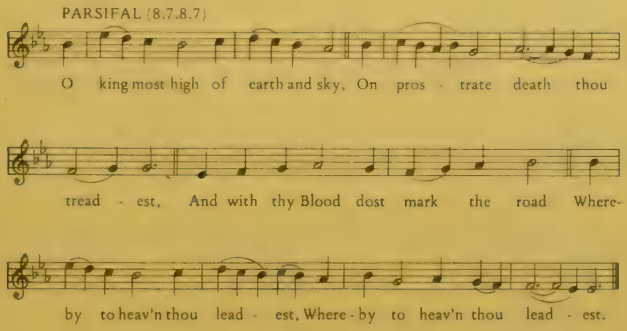
This is the refrain:


SALVE FESTA DIES (Irreg.)
Hail thee, Fes - ti - val Day! blest day that art hal-lowed for - ev - er;
Day where-in Christ a - rose, break - ing the king - dom of death.

At no. 641 we find Vaughan Williams's great setting of the iambic pentameter lines of Bishop How (d. 1897), "For all the saints." The editor's calling the tune SINE NOMINE (nameless) shows his whimsical attitude toward tune names: WHITE GATES was his residence in Dorking, DOWN AMPNEY his birthplace. To those who hear Tschaikovsky in the opening phrase one is tempted to repeat what Brahms said to someone who heard in the start of his A Major violin sonata a phrase by Wagner: "Any fool can see that." Vaughan Williams's phrase probably occurs several million times in the music of almost everybody. Looked at by phrases, this noble tune is ABCD. Vaughan Williams lengthened the last phrase of music (the meter is 10.10.10.4.) by repeating the word, "Alleluia". The tune is not only strong melodically, but has fine harmonic propulsion. At no point till the end does the marching bass rest, a bass perhaps suggested by Bach's mighty Credo. Along the way there are half-cadences and deceptive cadences that keep the tension taut.


SINE NOMINE (10.10.10.4.)
For all the saints who from their la - bours rest, Who thee by
faith be - fore the world con - fest; Thy name, O Je - sus,
be for - ev - er blest. Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia.

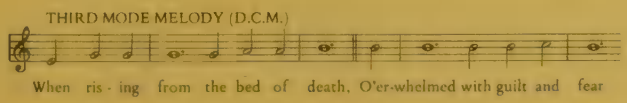
Luther is thought to have replied to the charge that he had adapted secular songs as hymns, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?" The two well-known chorals show the wisdom of Luther's practice: 1) Hassler's madrigal, "Mein G'muet ist mir verwirret" became "O Haupt, voll Blut und Wunden;" 2) "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen" became, by changing a single word, "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen." In the crucible of time, all recall of the original poems has disappeared. Some of the material on which Vaughan Williams drew shows similar ingenuity; the Church, he argued, can use any music that is noble and practicable. In *The English Hymnal,* it is a delight to find at no. 80 a tune dubbed SOLOMON, the words a translation by Edward Caswall of a 17th century Latin poem, "My God, I love thee." The music is derived from one of Handel's pieces for Solomon to sing in that much neglected masterpiece, "What though I trace each herb and flower." Nor can we fault Dr. Williams for including two utterances by Wagner. First, at no. 313, a tune called by its original text, DA ZU DIR DER HEILAND KAM, the chorale sung at the rise of the curtain in *Die Meistersinger.* Sensing that it would be only rarely used if he retained the St. John's Day poem, the editor asked Mr. Dearmer to supply a poem suitable for Holy Communion: "Holy God, we show forth here." The second tune from Wagner is a passage from *Parsifal* which occurs as hymn no. 629, set to a translation by W. J. Blew of the 17th century Latin poem, "O King most high of earth and sky." The soul of honesty, Dr. Williams put, below Wagner's name and dates, *slightly adapted.*

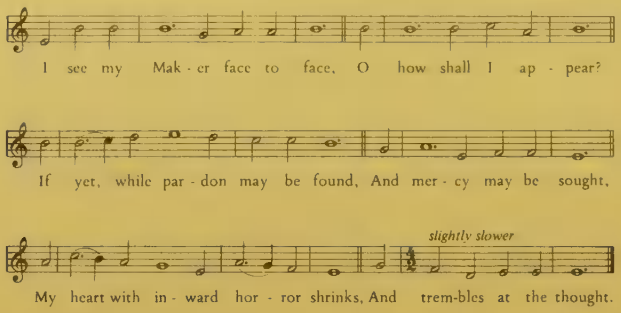

PARSIFAL (8.7.8.7)
O king most high of earth and sky, On pros - trate death thou
tread - est, And with thy Blood dost mark the road Where-
by to heav'n thou lead - est, Where - by to heav'n thou lead - est.

Scattered through the book are about ten tunes from various sources harmonized by Vaughan Williams. Like his own hymns, these productions are masterly—within the tradition, they still exhibit the same care for a living harmonic texture. All of Vaughan Williams's own tunes, except RANDOLPH, avoid literal repetition of any line of music. The first and last phrases of RANDOLPH are alike because the text line is repeated. Tunes without repeated lines may be harder to learn, but, once learned, they are more fun to sing.

Aside from his own tunes and arrangements, Dr. Williams included new tunes by W. H. Bell, Walford Davies, T. F. Dunhill, Nicholas Gatty, A. M. Goodhart, Gustav Holst, John Ireland, Sir Walter Parratt and Arthur Somervell. Kennedy tells us that only the tunes by Holst, Vaughan Williams, and Ireland have achieved wide acceptance. Surely Holst's setting of Christina Rossetti's poem, "In the bleak midwinter," is known wherever English carols are sung.

His researches in connection with the production of *The English Hymnal* brought Dr. Williams into touch with an enormous body of music, much of it new to him. Only one of Tallis's tunes had become widely known, the famous TALLIS'S CANON. Of the six Tallis hymns in the hymnal prepared by Vaughan Williams (another, no. 153, VENI CREATOR, is falsely *attributed* to Tallis) the most haunting, most remarkable is no. 92, THIRD MODE MELODY. To this the editor was able to fit a poem by Joseph Addison, "When, rising from the bed of death." (It had formerly been used with Milton's paraphrase of Psalm 2: "Why fum'th in fight the Gentiles' spite?") Beneath Tallis's name and dates Dr. Williams noted *"rhythm slightly simplified."* He included an alternative version "intended for choir alone and must be sung without the organ," in which the tune is in the tenor. It is substantially Tallis's original version.




I see my Mak - er face to face, O how shall I ap - pear?
If yet, while par - don may be found, And mer - cy may be sought,
slightly slower
My heart with in - ward hor - ror shrinks, And trem-bles at the thought.

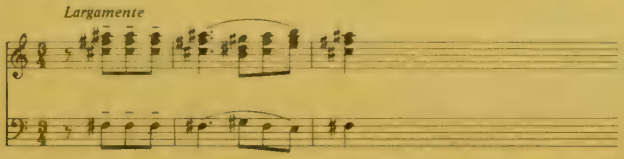
This THIRD MODE MELODY was used several years later in *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis,* along with the symphonies, Vaughan Williams's most-played orchestral work. It was first heard in September, 1910, at a concert of the Three Choirs Festival, as a prelude to Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius.* Responsive to criticism, the composer withdrew the work, revised it, and cut its length before its publication in 1921. Kennedy says: "As it now stands, it is one of the sublime masterpieces of English music." Kennedy suggests that the *Fantasia* is intimately connected with the double-choired choral polyphony of the Golden Age, such as Palestrina's *Stabat Mater,* with the richness of the sounds the composer heard in his early years in Ely Cathedral. And its very title suggests its debt to the English Fancy or Fantasia for strings, whose chief proponent was William Byrd—a form that owes much to the form of the madrigal. No one has better phrased the effect of this masterpiece than Fuller-Maitland in his review of the first performance:

> . . . one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new . . . The voices of the old church musicians . . . are around one, and yet there is more besides . . . Debussy, too, is somewhere in the picture and it is hard to tell how much of the complete freedom of tonality comes from the new French school, and how much from the old English one . . . it is full of visions which have haunted the seers of all times.

The Fantasia is laid out in three large sections, the first and third with a signature of two flats, the middle one blank. After two preludial bars with the chords in contrary motion,

the two orchestras together, in eight or more parts, richly expose the Tallis theme twice, once at a low pitch, then in the high violins. After four bars of interlude at rehearsal letter E, the two flats are dropped

and the long middle section starts with a new version of the theme:



At letter I, a new theme is announced in the solo viola,

soon repeated by the solo violins and 'cello. The quartet and the two orchestras now develop all these materials to reach an intense climax four bars before letter Q and subsides a few bars before letter T. Two bars before letter U, the two-flat signature returns and the instruments, grouped again as two orchestras with solo violin and viola, comment nostalgically on the Tallis melody. The second interlude is then recalled, wisps of the tune appear in the lower strings, veering toward f minor, from which comes the final, glorious plagal candence:

II

The purpose of *Songs of Praise,* published by the Oxford University Press in 1925, with a second, enlarged edition in 1931, was much wider than that of *The English Hymnal,* which was for the established church only. Percy Dearmer was general editor, but he brought in Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw to be joint music editors. In his preface, Mr. Dearmer said the book is "intended to be national . . . including a full expression of that faith which is common to the English-speaking peoples today, both in the British Commonwealth and in the United States." This was to include not only all Protestant congregations, but all schools, both private and tax-supported. It is gratifying, says Mr. Kennedy, that Dearmer's hopes were gloriously fulfilled.

The book repeats to some extent the format of the earlier hymnal, save that the square notation for plainsong is dropped. As before, the older tunes are printed in half-notes and whole-notes, the more recent ones in quarters and eighths. To the zeal of the music editors are owed over 100 tunes, either composed or arranged. Since the book was to be

used in rooms lacking organs as well as in churches, many of the accompaniments are in pianoforte style. Among these are some fine pieces that are scarcely hymns at all: no. 446 JERUSALEM is Hubert Parry's splendid setting of the Blake poem, "And did those feet;" Vaughan Williams's unison setting of words from Ecclesiasticus, "Let us now praise famous men," appears at no. 432, FAMOUS MEN; Martin Shaw's setting of the Whitman words, "All the past we leave behind," is no. 304, PIONEERS; and Gustav Holst's setting no. 498, CHILSWELL of Bridge's "Gird on thy sword, O man." Still finding worthier tunes for beloved poems, the editors included William Harris's tune ALBERTA, no. 554, for Newman's "Lead kindly light."

III

This paper would not be complete without mention of Vaughan Williams's contributions to *The Oxford Book of Carols* (1928) in which he again collaborated with Percy Dearmer and Martin Shaw. About half the book is devoted to British carols, mostly English, many of them arranged, some of them discovered, by Vaughan Williams. The carols display an astonishing range of subject matter and of musical qualities. Especially poignant are those that deal with the death of Jesus as well as with his birth, often in metaphors from medieval life, such as "Down in yon forest." There are a few lovely Easter carols that deserve much wider use. The second large section brings together a rich treasury of foreign carols, some like "In dulci jubilo," macaronic in text. An especially strong 16th century tune is given with the original Latin text from *Piae Cantiones* (1592), with strong harmonies by Gustav Holst which respect the Dorian modality. A shorter third section contains more recent settings: unforgettable here are those of Peter Warlock and Edmund Rubbra. In this section are four tunes written for this collection by Vaughan Williams:

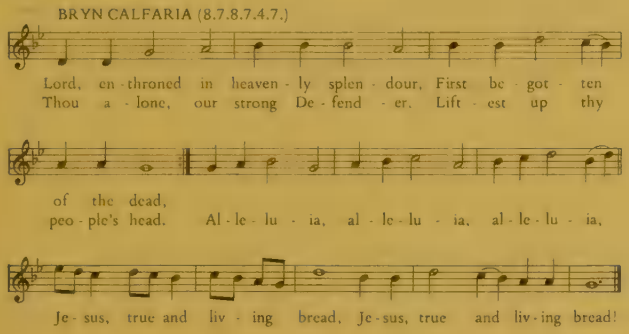
173. The Golden Carol. "Now is Christemas y-come."
185. Wither's Rocking Hymn. "Sweet baby, sleep! what ails my dear?"
186. Snow in the Street. "From far away we come to you."
196. Blake's Cradle Song. "Sweet dreams, form a shade."

In 1911, Vaughan Williams published his *Fantasia on Christmas Carols,* in which he used three complete carols — "The Truth Sent from Above," "On Christmas Night," "Come all you worthy gentlemen" — as well as bits from more familiar tunes.

IV

Turning aside from collections of tunes, let us now consider a few examples of Vaughan Williams's masterly use of tunes, starting with

the "Three Preludes on Welsh Hymns." They are, as all organists know, BRYN CALFARIA, RHOSYMEDRE, and HYFRYDOL. The first two Dr. Williams retained in g minor and G Major, keys suitable for singing. HYFRYDOL, however, he pitched in C in order to achieve brilliance for his setting, in which the melody is in the highest voice. Especially in RHOSYMEDRE and HYFRYDOL he used the technique of planing, which he had learned from the French Impressionists and used in that wonderful work, the *Mass in g minor.* A London critic wrote, after hearing this Mass in Westminster Abbey, that more parallel fifths were heard in a half-hour in that building than had been heard in the previous 800 years. Preludes 2 and 3 are more effective in performance than the much more contrapuntal BRYN CALFARIA. But the last-named is, for many, the gem of the group—for the skill with which he used every particle of the tune. It is among the finest of all Welsh tunes, sadly lacking from many American hymnals. As a hymn, the relation of text to music is unusually subtle. Equally fine is the persistence of the rhythm: two quarters and a half-note through seven bars, then the eighth bar a rhythm twice as fast bursts forth and the tune ends by repeating the third and fourth bars.


BRYN CALFARIA (8.7.8.7.4.7.)
Lord, en - throned in heaven - ly splen - dour, First be - got - ten
Thou a - lone, our strong De - fend - er. Lift - est up thy
of the dead,
peo - ple's head. Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia,
Je - sus, true and liv - ing bread, Je - sus, true and liv - ing bread!

Then there are the composer's hymn-anthems. There is a pair of works which use OLD HUNDREDTH: "The Hundredth Psalm" of 1929 and "The Old Hundredth Psalm Tune," (published by Stainer and Bell and O.U.P., respectively), written for the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. The earlier piece is richer and more satisfactory from every standpoint. In it the text is divided into its natural four segments. The opening fanfare of three bars is integrated into the first section of sixty bars that sets the first two segments of text in G Major in a vigorous style. The third segment of text, "O go your way . . .," is set in a quiet lento section of twenty bars, with OLD HUNDREDTH moving quietly in the organ pedal, all but the final phrase, which is sung by the voices imitatively. From the first phrase of the tune the composer fashioned a ritornello in gently lilting 12/8, an andante of fifty bars, over which the choir sings the final words of the

psalm in graceful arabesques, with canonic entries. The opening fanfare returns fortissimo, against which the unison voices intone OLD HUNDREDTH to the Gloria Patri from the metrical psalm of W. Kethe, a finale of twenty-four bars. For the coronation piece, Dr. Williams used the fanfare and concluding section of the psalm setting, with interludes omitted, prefaced by the rest of the versified psalm. In involving the congregation in the opening stanza and the Gloria, the composer achieved congregational participation in a coronation anthem for the first time in British history.

Passing reference should be made here to "Lord, thou hast been our refuge," (1921) for SATB and semi-chorus, orchestra or organ, which makes use of the poem by Isaac Watts and of the tune, "St. Anne;" of the Variations on ABERYSTWYTH from *Household Music* of 1941, arranged for organ in 1949 by Herbert Byard; of the "Fantasia on Greensleves," adapted from the opera *Sir John in Love* and arranged for many media from full orchestra (RVW) to chamber duets, by many persons, for organ by Stanley Roper. Special mention must be made of the splendid *Fantasia on the Old 104th Psalm Tune,* first performed at the Three Choirs Festival in 1950, for the unusual combination of SATB choir, piano solo, and full orchestra with organ. The tune, a strong one in triple meter, is unhappily not widely known in the United States. The composer's use of it shows one more side of his imagination. Without changing or distorting it, he bars it in one passage as 4/4 instead of 3/4. (It is possible that Dr. Williams got the idea for this false barring from the spot in Siegfried's Rhine Journey in *Die Goetterdaemmerung,* where the 4/4 theme is barred as 3/4.) The piano writing is as effective as any he ever did.

A splendid hymn arrangement for a festival service is the one Vaughan Williams made of KING'S WESTON for the seven stanzas of "At the Name of Jesus" (Published by O.U.P.). Especially effective is the SATB choir setting of the third stanza with the tune in the alto part. The superb descant for stanzas 4 and 5 need a strong soprano section.

V

When Ralph Vaughn Williams departed this life in 1958 at the age of eighty-six, he left behind a rich legacy in every field of musical endeavor. His contribution to the world of the hymn, starting with his editorship and his own splendid tunes and reaching a climax with his Tallis *Fantasia,* leaves us indeed "riches too great to count," before which we stand a moment in awe and go forward strengthened and renewed.

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